



King County Mental Health Chemical Abuse and Dependency Services Division 2002 Briefing Paper

KING COUNTY DISTRICT MENTAL HEALTH COURT

BACKGROUND:

On February 17, 1999, King County District Court instituted a specialized Mental Health Court. This project was created in order to better serve the community by addressing public safety, reducing criminalization of persons with mental illness, and promoting systems integration. The planning involved key players from across the county using a collaborative approach to create an effective working pilot program. The foundation of the court has remained the same since it first began although some of the daily practices and procedures have shifted to meet changing needs. The program's pilot status changed to that of a permanent program after two years and the court continues to operate with the support of the involved systems, clients, families, and community.

The Mental Health Court strives to increase public safety and humanely deal with individuals with mental disorders who enter the criminal justice system and is committed to focusing resources, training, and expertise on the unique needs of these individuals. In the regular system, defendants often interact with a number of different defenders, prosecutors, and judges all on the same case, which is an approach that often creates barriers that prevent the court from identifying and addressing the unique needs of the mentally ill offender. Mentally ill offenders often spend unnecessary time in jail and, lacking access to mental health treatment services on release, often become repeat offenders and cycle through the justice system again.

Through Mental Health Court, the defendant can work with a specialized team including a dedicated judge, prosecutor, public defender, treatment court liaison, and probation officers to receive court-ordered treatment instead of standard sentencing. Successful participation in the treatment plan may result in dismissed charges or reduced sentencing. The project hopes to achieve the following outcomes for the mentally ill misdemeanor population: faster case processing time, improved access to public mental health treatment services, improved well-being, and reduced recidivism.

ISSUES/CHALLENGES:

Additional funding is needed to support the Mental Health Court and community management of participants. There is a need for additional staff to support an increase in caseload, outpatient services for non-Medicaid clients, detox and residential chemical dependency treatment for clients with co-occurring mental health and chemical dependency disorders, and crisis as well as interim and long-term housing for participants. The clients that come through the Court are primarily non-Medicaid, and current budget constraints have severely limited the number of non-Medicaid people who can be admitted to the long-term outpatient system.

DATA:

Numbers of Persons Served in 2001: 400

RECOMMENDATION/LEGISLATIVE ACTION:

The Mental Health Court offers a model distinct from existing practices that has the potential to reduce the demand for jail services while promoting positive outcomes for defendants and the public. It is recommended that the systems that facilitated the creation of the Mental Health Court sustain their commitment to this process and look for innovative ways to fund access to care.